The Ghost Towns of De Witt County, Ill.

By Fern Lane Briggs.

Clinton , Illinois
March 20 , 1983

Dear Helen :

If there is anybody in the world slower than I am I would like to meet them . I have a million excuses , been busy , spent time in the hospital from pulling a stupid trick . Tried to lift something bigger than I am and tore the ligements in my back . Just got home and took a terrible cold that I can't shake . ' Nuf , said about my excuses . Right ?

Anyway , I finally got the copy of my talk at the Old Settlers Reunion a coupla' years ago typed up for you . Hope you enjoy it .

Too , I am enclosing a real cute poem that I recieved from a Lady in Oregon , it describes me to a " T ".

Best Wishes ,

Fern

Fern Lane Briggs .

Ghost Towns of De Witt County , Illinois

By Fern Lane Briggs .

When I was asked to give this talk today - My answer was No - I am not a speaker and you will most likely agree with me before I am finished .

First of all , let me introduce myself - I am Fern Lane Briggs - Editor of the column " Kinfolk Korner ", which appears in three local newspapers , The Clinton Journal , The Farmer City Journal and the Focus section of the Decatur paper .

I am a native of De Witt County , my forefathers settled in the Rock Creek Area in 1830 . They were Tillmon and Margaret (Lyon) Lane .

My talk is to be on the Ghost towns of De Witt County - You will see on the poster that I have prepared , only three are actually shown as Ghost Towns , but there are many more - some I have located and some I haven't .

Franklin .

The village of Franklin once stood at the site of the old Pastime Park . The beginning of Franklin , as near as can be determined was in 1838 when James and Melville Lowery settled in section 2 of what is now De Witt County where they built a water mill . At first this mill was equipped only as a saw mill but was converted so as to grind both corn meal and wheat flour . These articles of food , a necessity , and in great demand by the early settlers , were ground by means of stone " burrs " made from rock secured along Salt Creek and shaped and fashioned into workable condition by hand . The first mill was in operation until 1844 when an unusally high water washed it , dam and all away , completely destroying the building and ruining most of the machinery .

But the Lowery's were not to be disheartened and at once rebuilt the structure , bigger and better than ever . The big trouble was that old Salt Creek had the habit of going on a " rampage " quite frequently and although the Lowery's were good machine operators , they seemed to be unable to build a dam that would " stay put " and often repeated " washouts " they became disheartened and sold their business to Levi Davenport . Mr . Davenport operated the mill only a short time when he sold

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to John H. Morrison. This was some where around 1850; and in 1854 James A. Kirby a native of Ohio, came to Illinois and located at what was already known as Franklin. Here he built a small building with living rooms above. His was the third, and also the last store building to be built in this village. Besides this store, which also happened to be the first post office in Junbridge township, Franklin also boasted of a blacksmith shop and a school house. While the other buildings were of frame construction, the school house was of logs, cracks between them were not chinked, and school was only held in mild weather.
The names of the first two merchants were William Barbee and James W. Armstrong, and the blacksmith shop was owned by J.Q. Burgett.
The town of Franklin began to " fade away and die " when the village of Kenney was started and several of the buildings were moved to the new village. The mill remained and the little post office was not done away with until the late 1880's.
The first store to be moved to the new town of Kenney was the Barabee store, then the blacksmith shop.
Mr. Morrison himself operated the Armstrong store for a short time while the other Morrison's - George, Harry and Ira ran the mill.
After the decline and fall of the village of Franklin, the historic old picnic ground " Pastime Park " came into being. This was somewhere in the 1880's and a spot that became widely and favorably known.
I feel that the story of " Pastime Park " - deserves to go down in history as a " Ghost town " too, even though it was not a town it was a place which had much history about it that needs to be preserved.

Zabriska.

This little village was located in Section 22 of Wapella township. The first church built in Wapella was a Christian church at Zabriska, which was still standing during the 1880's, and possibly later. It was located so near St. Patricks Catholic cemetery north of Wapella, that unless one knew, they would assume it was a Catholic church.
The first post office in Wapella township was operated from the private residence of Abraham Swearingen in 1845 but the service was moved to Zabriska in 1849.

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William Rolofson constructed the first saw mill at Zabriska in 1843. It had a small circular saw and was run by horse power. It had disappeared from the scene long before 1880. Wapella was not surveyed until the autumn of 1854 and the lots were sold in the spring of 1855.

By 1891 the village of Zabriska was called Long Point.

It has never been determined how the name of Zabriska came about.

Swisher.

The G.B. Lemen and Isaac Swisher families arrived in Harp township, Section 2 in 1836. Other related families and friends soon followed. The area later known as Swisher was originally called "Lemen Settlement".

Thomas Wilson, of Maryland, erected the first saw mill in section 2 that same year near the present old Swisher hill bridge. In 1840, he added a burr for grinding corn. There was no bridge at Swisher hill until after the turn of the century.

The first school house taught in the Lemen Settlement by John Dougherty, whom it was said was too lazy to do manual labor so called himself a teacher. His students later said, he could not distinguish a "q" from a "p" or a "b" from a "d".

South of the settlement approximately one half mile, is an early burial ground, now overgrown and nearly obliterated where interments were made even before the permanent settlement in 1836. It was known as Lemen cemetery.

Solomon Despain, a Baptist minister who first settled near Waynesville, came to Lemen Settlement in 1837 and sat up a blacksmith shop about half way between Swisher hill and the later established Swisher school.

Until the 1920's, the mile of road between Swisher hill and the Swisher school had six turns in it. One turned south at the top of the hill, continued for several yards and then turned east. If one desired to go south, instead, that curve to The west was called "Smokey Row". In 1860 a Mr. Leonard erected a blacksmith shop near the crest of the hill, not far from the Tom Wilson's mill.

When school districts were organized and schools were every two miles apart - the school east of Lemen Settlement was named for the Swisher family and gradually the immediate area became known as "Swisher".

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Prior to 1900, Jerimah (Jerry) Curl operated a store there. The residents of the neighborhood, came there to pick up their mail, which was brought in from other points by Frank Merrifield. He was the father of Harry Merrifield, Pauline Merrifield, Mrs. Zula Thorp, Gladys Ives, Hallie Mc Kinley, Rebecca Coons, and Earl Merrifield.

Around 1906, a cobbler shop was operated by John Walker and his brother William Walker who had a blacksmith shop there. Their mother was a Mrs. Brady and they lived where Herman Short now owns. All three are buried at Walters cemetery.

Jonathan Swisher lived across the road from the school (North) and was along in years when he married a Swedish woman, much younger, and her daughter attended the nearby school.

At the crest of the Swisher hill, was a grocery store owned by Lew Taylor, his father, Samuel Taylor, lived in a house to the north of a long lane. That house has been gone for many years.

Fred Smalley who lived at the bottom of Carter hill west of Salt Creek bought out Lew Taylor's stock about 1914 and rented the building. Due to a disagreement over the rent, Smalley moved the inventory to a small building across the road from his house, north, at the bottom of Carter hill. This was the last business place in this settlement and it ended by 1920.

The town of Swisher had a post office from 1886 until 1905.

Solomon.

I could write a book on the things that I personally remember about the Solomon area when I was growing up - but they would not give you the history - just pranks that my brothers and sisters, along with our friends and school mates, pulled. Since this is supposed to be the history of the community, I will try to stick to that today. I had to call on several old timers of the neighborhood for my facts. In the different interviews, I found a few discrepancies, but you will get a good picture of what Solomon once was.

Taken from the American Aerial County History series - published in 1955, I found the following: The only community of Wilson township on the north border of De Witt Co., is the hamlet of Solomon, with a population of 51. It is situated

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in the midst of a level fertile farming region. (This amuses me, calling it level, to me it is hills and hollers) The township in which Solomon is located has a present population of 335. Among early settlers in the township were Thomas and Edward Wilson, brothers, who came in 1834. Another brother arrived in 1837. Other settlers were Jacob Walters, John Lash, John Guittman and Michael Troutman. William Wilson was the first justice of the peace.

Dr. Moran was the first blacksmith (which disagrees with the list that I will give you later from a personal interview.)

Jacob WALTERS was the first shoemaker and for many years made the boots and shoes for the settlers for miles around. (End of quote from printed material.)

Wilson township was settled shortly after 1830 and that area recieved the name of Solomon in the following way: An early settler by the name of Samuel Franklin Merrifield had a store across from the old tile factory now owned by Ray Johnson, just east of the present home of Donald Dunlap in Wilson township. This was the site of the first Solomon store and it was used as a post office also.

Mr. Merrifield wrote to Springfield to see if the area could be named Merrifield, so the post office could have a name and an address. The officials wrote back that there was already a settlement in Illinois with the name of Merrifield but that it could officially be called Solomon. Later the store was moved to the area near the T road just south of the Walden cemetery. At one time there was a library in the store and I understand that a lady in Clinton, Illinois has one book that came from that library.

One store owner pulled teeth at 10¢ a tooth and another charged a fee for legal advice rendered. (I haven't learned who these mem were.)

People that ran the Solomon store through the years were: They may or may not be in succession.

Park Gardner, Robert Emery, Solomon F. Merrifield, Kenny Van Deventer, A Mr. Dolly, Ira Emery, Clarence Price, Jake Harrold, W.E. Walden, James Yones, Y.G. (Mike) Walden Hugh Stapleton, Jack Clemons, Coy Torbert, D.W. Vanpotten, and Marie Lane (wife of Chelsa Lane.)

When Jake Harrold owned the store in 1918, my grandfather Jack or (J.P.) Lane,

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drove a wagon loaded with groceries through the neighborhood for Mr. Harrold, to accommodate those people that couldn't always get to the store. Grandpa Lane also owned a pool hall across the road from the store, he later sold it to a blind man by the name of Lon Walden. Stories are that he was doing a flourishing business but the congregration of the Rucker Chapel church objected so strongly that Mr. Walden burned it to the ground without removing any of the furnishings or his inventory. Rumors are that $ 1100.00 woth of candy burned.

Harve Wilson owned the first blacksmith shop also across the road from the store. Other owners were: Winfond Kanser, Tom Payton, Henry Peavler, Gordon Worthy, Lee Kelley and Bill Peavler, a son of Henry. Again, I can't say that the names given are in the order of ownership. When Henry Peavler had his blacksmith shop it stood on the same side of the road as the store and his house stood just a few yards south and west of the shop.

The Solomon store has been in four locations.

First in Section 13 before 1860 - Second in Section 24 about 1860 - Third in Section 25 about 1875 - Fourth in Section 26. I don't know when it was built but Jake Harrold was in the fourth location in 1918.

Albert Bray dug a hole with a bull dozer in September 1966 and buried Solomon.

That old store, probably from the time of it's first existence, was for many years, the meeting place for all the men for miles around. They would gather there winter and summer to swap yarns - each one trying to tell a bigger one than the man before him.

Robert Emery lived on the east side of the road and had a Farmers Exchange telephone, He also went to De Witt once a week to pick up the mail and used his home as a post office.

At the present time the only thing left standing to show that a town was once there is the old hitching rack on the east side of the road.

One more thing that I feel is very important as Solomon history is the many rugs woven on that big old loom by Mrs. Carter, the first house on the north side of the road on top of Carter hill. How fascinating it was to watch her weave those beautiful rugs. I parted with my last one when I left Chicago in 1976, and it was used constantly from 1932 to 1976.

I believe my husband's sister may still have one that I gave her, probably in the year of 1932.

And last but not least was the swimming hole on my great - grandfather's farm - Everybody called it " Dinky Lane's Bottom ". I think some of the Carter family now owns it.

I could go on and on but my time is running out - I was asked to give a short talk, not to take up the whole day.

A LITTLE MIXED UP

Just a line to say I'm living
That I'm not among the dead,
Though I'm getting more forgetful
And more mixed up in my head.

For sometimes I can't remember
When I stand at the foot of the stair
If I must go up for something,
Or if I've just come down from there.

And, before the "fridge" so often
My poor head is filled with doubt -
Have I put the food away ?
Or have I come to take it out ?

And then, when it is dark outside
With my night cap on my head,
I don't know if I'm retiring
Or ---just getting out of bed !

So, if it is my turn to write,
There's no need in getting sore -
I may think that I've written you
And don't want to be a bore.

So, remember that I love you
And I wish that you were here,
But now it's nearly mail time
So I'll say "Goodbye, my dear".

Postcript:

There I stood, beside the mailbox
With a face so very red -
Instead of mailing you my letter,
I had opened it instead.

Author unknown.